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ABSTRACT

In order to produce an authentic portrait of the good composition teacher, a questionnaire was sent to 36 chairs of English departments and directors of freshman English in 15 states asking for the traits, characteristics, and attitudes considered exemplary in the composition teacher. Responses varied extensively. As the "most accurate means of identifying the good teacher of composition," methods included student writing improvement; student response to the teacher; the teacher's interests, attitudes, and qualities; evidence of knowledge of subject matter; and the teacher's publications. Of 52 ideal qualities enumerated by the chairs, patience was the only quality that recurred more than five times. Other popular responses included enthusiasm, flexibility, and optimism. Skills that were listed with the qualities were motivating students, correcting errors, responding to students' work, communicating with the students, teaching academic discourse, locating the source of writing patterns, discerning and respecting the writer's purpose, and maintaining high standards without being discouraging. By a large margin, the individual conference was listed as the most essential composition activity, followed by the careful revision of work, regular class attendance, and weekly assignments. (HAI)

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The Good Teacher: A Composite of Qualities and Attitudes

An American tragedy of the seventies is the refusal of many teachers of composition to admit to the seriousness of the problems confronting the profession today or to accept accountability for the substandard level of competency in students' writing. Most of us, however, agonize over the realization that since the sixties, efforts to maintain proficiency in the writing of college students have not met with much success. This is particularly true of students at mostly urban, state, and Black colleges and universities, especially those with open admissions policies.

Mina Shaughnessy suggests that composition teachers have no alternative except to admit these "new" students into the community of the educable, adding that "teaching them to write well is not only suitable but challenging work for those who would be teachers and scholars in a democracy."[1] In order to meet the crisis facing the profession head on, composition specialists, rising above polemics, must broaden their research to embrace not only specific programs and techniques but also definite qualities and attitudes that contribute to student growth. In other words, the profession needs to determine if flexibility and diversity in qualities and attitudes are as important in teaching composition as knowledge

[1]Mina Shaughnessy, "Diving In: An Introduction to Basic Writing," College Composition and Communication, 27 (October, 1976), 239.

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of subject matter and mastery of techniques. After all, students are individuals, not cars on an assembly line.

If instruction in composition were student centered, perhaps speakers at national conferences would be encouraged to present with greater restraint their panaceas for the writing ills of students in composition classes. After many years of attending sessions on teaching composition at national conferences, I am beginning to question the propriety of presentations whose end result appears to be that of shattering experienced and successful teachers' confidence in practices that have worked for them through the years. The obvious frustration of many of these teachers has been, to say the least, disquieting. Howard O. Brogan recommends a replacement of the whole concept of mass education with an understanding that "however multitudinous the number of students to be educated, each of them is an individual who must individually assimilate what is to be learned and must individually learn how to learn and how to use what he learned."[2] The time has come for teachers of composition to scrutinize carefully the other side of the coin. Certainly, command of subject matter, familiarity with current practices and techniques, and productivity are fundamental. However, my inclination is to believe that no single technique, practice or theory should be considered a cure-all for students' writing ills. It seems to me that the "good" teacher of composition, an individualist

[2]Howard O. Brogan, "Mass Education and the Development of Skills," College Composition and Communication, 12 (December, 1961), 241.

herself, gives top priority not to approved programs or methods per se, but rather to their suitability to the emotional and intellectual needs of the individuals who make up her class. Failure to take into consideration the purely human factors may result in unaccounted for successes and failures.

In an effort to produce an authentic portrait of the good teacher of composition, a composite of the profiles of experienced educators in the profession, I recently distributed brief questionnaires to thirty-six chairmen of English departments and directors of freshman English at mostly city and state universities in fifteen states and the District of Columbia. Twenty-four of these educators (67%) returned the forms. As would be expected, an analysis of the responses revealed the futility of seeking a consensus among English professors concerning anything at all, including qualities and attitudes which are most effective in helping students achieve competency in writing.

The first question of the inquiry asked, "What do you consider the most accurate means of identifying the good teacher of composition?" While slightly more than one-half of the specialists followed a single procedure in ferreting out the "good" teacher, others employed a combination of two or more means of doing so. The most common method was through the students whom they taught, twelve educators identifying evidences of improvement in student writing as the most valuable means, and four relying almost solely on students' responses to questions asked about the teacher. Most of the

officials, however, included comments on the teachers' interests, attitudes, and qualities (to be discussed more fully in the next item on the questionnaire) as indicative of their worth. Only two respondents emphasized evidence of knowledge of subject matter and the teachers' publications. More than one-half of the professors believed such qualities as enthusiasm, staying power, and devotion to the task of teaching to be the most valuable attributes of the teacher of composition.

The second question sought greater specificity of traits, characteristics, and attitudes considered exemplary in the composition teacher: "Assuming that the teacher of composition has adequate command of the subject matter, list in the descending order of importance the three most essential qualities, attitudes, characteristics of the good teacher of composition." While one-half of the directors and chairmen limited their responses to qualities and attitudes, the remaining respondents refused to be bound by such limitations, listing competencies, depth of subject matter, and productivity as well. For example, one director viewed the ideal teacher as a composite of (a) emotional stability and sympathy for students, (b) poise and performance ability, and (c) continuing experience in writing himself/herself. Another combined (a) humor and compassion with (b) a belief in remediation as a social policy, and (c) training in linguistics and/or the field of composition. Surprisingly, of more than fifty answers received to the three-part item, only two specialists considered a sense of humor to be an essential trait of the composition

teacher (that is, if the "non-judgmental, Rogerian facillitative attitude" of one of them indeed connotes humor). One would think that this quality would be an indispensable tool not only in effecting improvement in students' work but also in helping to maintain sanity in moments of frustration for teachers and students.

Of fifty-two ideal qualities enumerated by the chairmen, only one recurred more than five times: patience was chosen by seven respondents. The second most popular response was enthusiasm, the choice of four of the specialists. Flexibility in accepting the various uses of language and optimism--"a positive view of students"--tied for third place among the qualities. While patience, enthusiasm, optimism, and flexibility were deemed the traits most vital for the composition teacher, many others were mentioned one or more times. At least two respondents chose belief in students' potential, creativity, sensitivity to "personal insights," energy intelligently focused, empathy, and genuine concern for the academic performance of students. Among the numerous characteristics believed to be essential in teaching composition--each mentioned only once in the survey--were the following: freedom, emotional stability, poise, a willingness to listen, an attitude of encouragement and praise, perseverance, selflessness, high moral character, imagination in stimulating students' interest in better expression, love of teaching, determination, understanding, openness to a range of views, rationality, thoroughness, personal maturity, persistence,

endurance, compassion, tolerance, and rapport with students.

Skills, abilities, and capacities listed among the above-mentioned qualities were abilities to motivate students, to correct students' errors, to articulate responses to students' work, to clearly communicate with students, to stick to the business of teaching academic discourse, to locate the source of students' writing patterns, to discern and respect writers' purposes, and to maintain high standards without being discouraging. Scholarship and research, as well as training in linguistics and composition, figured, also, in the portrait of the "good" teacher of composition. One director thought the conditions of work--class size, course requirements, and evaluation incentives--to be more important than personal characteristics.

Perhaps the most telling responses to questions pertaining to attitudes of teachers, and the ones that might assist the composition teacher in revaluating certain practices and activities traditionally associated with freshman English, were made to the following request:

> On a scale of 1 to 5, rate the following activities and practices of the teacher of composition at a college that has an open admissions policy (the highest score is one): (a) the writing laboratory, (b) the individual conference, (c) insistence on meeting college standards, (d) regular class attendance, (e) weekly written assignments, (f) careful revision of papers, (g) availability of interesting models (readings), (h) instruction in grammar, (i) independent use of a good college handbook, (j) extensive reading and vocabulary building, (k) other practices (to be filled in by the respondent).

Although the results may not be surprising to many teachers, they are enlightening and perhaps encouraging, especially when

they are in accord with their own cherished attitudes. By a large margin, the experts chose the individual conference with the student as the most essential of all activities of the composition teacher. Twenty-one of the twenty-four directors gave this practice their highest rating, 17 rating it 1, while four rated it 2. The second most effective means of accomplishing the goals of the composition course, according to the educators, is the students' careful revision of their papers. This activity received 20 of the highest scores (1 and 2). It was rated 4 by only one respondent and received not a single 5. Tying for third place among the activities were regular class attendance and weekly written assignments. Eighteen of the specialists gave high ratings to each of these items.

Of the remaining activities, the writing laboratory occupied fifth place, slightly less than half of the composition directors rating it high. Four respondents failed to rate the activity at all, possibly indicating an unfamiliarity with the laboratory as a means of increasing students' writing competency. Midway on the hierarchy of attitudes towards composition practices was the teachers' insistence on students' meeting college standards. An explanation for the average rating given college standards is not easily accessible. Could it be that the eight specialists who gave it a relatively low rating reflected the permissiveness and the leniency brought on by the unrest of the sixties? Or could it be they reasoned that college standards would be the inevitable result of effective performance in the activities which they rated high on the

scale? Extensive reading and vocabulary building, the availability of interesting readings, instruction in grammar, and independent use of a good handbook received 12, 9, 5, and 3 high ratings respectively. If the battle over the teaching of grammar that has been waged in American schools for the past three centuries has any significance to present-day teachers of composition, it is obvious that the anti-grammarians are gradually convincing members of the profession that a knowledge of grammar does not necessarily assure one of proficiency in writing. Yet, is it not true that in many American colleges with open admissions policies the remedial course in English (English 100 at most institutions) often gives priority to grammar instruction rather than to actual practice in writing?

Additional activities or competencies thought to be vital by directors of composition (recorded under "other activities" in the questionnaire) were practicing particular sentence and paragraph structures, effective assignments, and exhibition of a knowledge of language structure. The point range from the most significant activity--the individual conference--to the least significant activity--use of a good college handbook--was 46.

The responses to two questions which I inserted in the inquiry with some reservations--questions labeled either dangerous or ridiculous by one respondent--indicated a degree of discord prevalent concerning even the need for the composition teacher in academe. "Is the college teacher of compo-

sition indispensable at colleges that have open admission policies?" Twenty-one of the twenty-four respondents answering (88%) gave an unequivocal "yes"; two, an unequivocal "no." Two professors admitted to having had no experience at such institutions, one responding with a hypothetical "yes," and the other refusing to commit himself to a definite answer.

The second "ridiculous" question--"Is the college teacher of composition indispensable at institutions that have high admissions policies?"--evoked 5 "no" responses, three more negative answers than were given for the open-admissions colleges. All five negative responses came from state universities, two of which are among our nation's largest. It may be interesting to note that a degree of uncertainty on the part of two respondents may be seen in the obvious substitution of a negative answer for a deleted positive one by one professor and in the interpolation of the affirmative response midway between "yes" and "no" by another. Two comments reflect the extent of the disagreement of teachers on this question. One respondent who answered "yes" commented, "Almost no student can do without a composition course." Another, who withheld a definite response, concluded, "They perhaps could fire the lot, but the need of a teacher has more to do with emotional stability than with intellectual standing."

Two inescapable conclusions, closely related to each other, may be drawn from the results of this random sampling of experienced supervisors of freshman English programs in America's mass educational system. First, there is a wide

diversity of opinions concerning both the qualities and the attitudes of the ideal composition teacher. The "good" teacher of composition is a composite of many different ingredients, which, considered separately, would reduce her to the dimensions of Emerson's negative portrait of the scholar of his day--"one who has been so minutely subdivided and peddled out, that it is spilled into drops, and cannot be gathered."[3] Considered as a composite, however, she is, like America's leading transcendentalist's "Man Thinking," an ideal scholar, who may be formed from a variety of combinations of qualities, attitudes, and competencies.

The second conclusion is that greater tolerance for qualities, attitudes, and techniques other than our own cherished ones is warranted. Ultimately, composition courses are established for students, rather than for skills or programs or techniques. Like Alexander Pope, we should agree that "if the means be just, the conduct true,/ Applause, in spight of trivial faults, is due."[4] We must remember that our products are individuals, not Pintos or Lincoln Continentals on an assembly line. If we are to achieve the goal which more than ever we have been accused of failing to accomplish--competency in communication skills for all students who are graduated from college--we must recognize these truths.

[3]George McMichael, Anthology of American Literature (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1974). I, 1303.

[4]Peter Quennell, The Pleasures of Pope (New York: Pantheon Books, 1950), p. 22.